



# Orange Sky

{ A short story by Sabrina Ali. }

**make.**believe.

“Are you yelling at each other?”

“No, we’re not.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Really.”

“So, why aren’t you getting married? I don’t understand.”

Lars had been in Vancouver for exactly two hours and what he most wanted to know was if Johan and I were using our words as daggers to pain one another. He went straight to the source of his concern – innocent and straight up. I had always loved that about him and it was also very Swedish of him.

I inhaled and looked into the concerned eyes of my soon-to-be ex-future father-in-law curious myself as to what I had to say in response to his question.

Eleven days ago he’d received an email from me. It was addressed to him and the other 50 guests Vancouver-bound from all corners of my life. In it, I explained that the wedding they thought they’d be attending had been ‘postponed,’ but that they should come anyway. Vacations had been planned a year in advance after all and we could all hang out still. Couldn’t we?

I didn’t know if Johan and I would stay together when I wrote that email. All I knew was that I’d lost my appetite, amongst other things. My symptoms of resistance had intensified as we marched closer to the wedding date.

I wanted – really badly I might add, my “problem” to be unrelated to the whole getting married thing. It was the last and only thing I hadn’t considered, until I actually did consider it. You see, I’d stuffed feeling “too inadequate to love” into a metal box and thrown it into the back closet of my psyche to suffocate. And still the pain wouldn’t go away. It had just worsened over time until it throbbed to the point of intolerable.

I suddenly saw the last six years with clarity in that I had been expending my energy trying to get Johan to do for me, what I would not do for myself. I thought that if someone (and had decided that “someone” should be Johan) could love me, that maybe it meant that I was worthy of love after all. I thought that if he could do it, then maybe I too could love me.

I finally released the imprisoned feeling from the recesses of my mind, after a great deal of agony. It was a “do or die” moment in my personal history. And then something happened that I did not expect. I witnessed a part of myself that I’d never met before take control to care for and unravel the mess my fears had made.

Seven days after my conversation with Lars about why Johan and I weren’t getting married, I had crystallized my commitment to live free. The wedding wasn’t just postponed; it was never going to be. To stay any longer would have been cruel because now that I was aware of my own inner workings, I couldn’t allow myself do any more harm to either of us. I had created all of this pain by trying to make things different than they actually were. My energy was devoted to resistance and now it was time to put down my armour. Be at peace with my real feelings. And really author my life.

And so the most significant intimate relationship in my life to date that spanned two continents and six years was over.

In the arms of surrender it felt like a natural death complete with a light at the end of the tunnel. I was certain that something bigger and more infinite was at work helping to bring my relationship to Johan to a compassionate and unforgettable close as those near and dear to us trickled into the city I called home.

Before I ever got married, here I was getting a divorce.

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Johan and his younger brother had run out of the room to meet the other guests in town for a night of karaoke, leaving Lars and I looking at one another.

Time stood still and I took in the scene - a dimly lit hotel room with the traditional green and pink floral bedspreads. I wondered if all the hotels in the world had the same decorator at one point in time. Then I heard myself asking:

“Are you hungry?”

“Yes. Dinner would be lovely.”

“How does sushi sound?” It was the standard Vancouver offering to out-of-town guests.

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In all our six years together, Johan had mostly become either scarce or emotionally unavailable when he was around his family – particularly his father. So, dinner alone with Lars was the rule rather than the exception. I hoped most that Lars didn't hate me for how things were unfolding with his son. I hoped that he wasn't mad that he helped to fund plane tickets and the wedding. Only to cross the Atlantic to see his eldest son not get married.

My friendship to Lars was curious to onlookers, but it worked really well. And it grew that way mostly due to circumstance. I had shared an apartment with him in Sweden – renting one of his three rooms.

The moment that we became actual friends, I remember well. It was the day he'd done his best to clean his wounds and haphazardly apply bandages to the cuts and scrapes on his face, hands and knees. My heart went out to him when I saw him that day, and he had accepted it. He had flown clear over his handlebars biking from the train station coming home after work. He needed sympathy and I gave it gladly.

Lars and the mother of his five children had been separated for a few years by this time. They still yelled at one another in each other's company despite their best efforts, which of course explained his opening question to me. To him, yelling was a sign of how bad things really were and in its absence the situation was perplexing. When Johan's parents had separated, Lars had decided to rent an apartment 10 minutes away by bike from the family home to be close to his children. He was a Chemist and travelled frequently for his work. And shortly after moving in together, I asked if my friend Isabel from Spain, also a Chemist in town on exchange, could live with us. Isabel and I would make dinner together and often invite Lars to join us when he was home. We'd stay up late chatting into the night sometimes.

It was a totally harmonious living arrangement, except when Lars would come home and join us in the living room, insisting that we not change the channel for his sake. We would be watching *Sex and the City*. Two 24-year-old females and their 60 year old roommate watching Samantha have orgasm after orgasm after orgasm.

Johan and I didn't live together in Sweden because he said that he needed space to study as he was expecting his upcoming year of studies to be quite intense. So he proposed that I live with his father instead. It wasn't until Johan and I moved to Vancouver that we started living together.

The sushi dinner with Lars after he'd arrived to Vancouver was the last conversation I ever had with him alone. I was afraid to lose him, not so much as a future father-in-law, but rather as my friend. I didn't expect him to want to know me. That's part and parcel of a

divorce right? People's decisions were to be respected, but I still allowed myself to be sad.

I admit that as guests landed in Vancouver I found the unfolding of their response to being there and the wedding postponement intriguing. Some seemed anxious while others thought nothing of it. One friend actually accused us of deceiving everyone as part of a plot to get everyone to visit. If only.

Nils, a childhood friend of Johan's who'd never left Sweden before decided to visit New York City en route to Vancouver. I had never seen him so full of life and so grateful just to be with us during this time. Lisa, Johan's sister, pleaded with me to re-consider what I was doing. She viewed me as the one with all the power. And if I was it was only because I was exercising sovereignty over myself for the first time in my life.

Most people though talked quietly amongst themselves comparing the information they each had about what was going on.

The day that we gathered together with our dearly beloved and didn't get married, is fondly, jokingly, embarrassingly, and peacefully referred to as 'the unwedding.' It was truly a magical day just not in the way you'd imagine. It was a sensitive time, but there was also joy. Joy in being together and having this once-in-a-lifetime experience.

It felt like a joyful funeral to be precise, except no one present was dead in a literal sense. It was instead the passing of an old life and the birthing of sweet possibility all at once. We had come together to celebrate what had been.

Johan and I had invited all of these lovely souls into our relationship, so it made sense that they were there to witness its conclusion. They were the reason that him and I worked. You see, Johan and I got along extremely well in the company of others. And all these people had filled in the gaps in one way or another socially and emotionally – the same gaps that we strained to fill on our own.

People loved us together and they wanted to help make our relationship possible because it was a pleasant experience for them to spend time with us. Johan entertained and I was hospitable. We were never public about our disagreements. It wasn't because there weren't any though. We just turned our anger inward. And so to the outside world, our relationship appeared to be perfect and the 'postponement' bewildering. From the inside it was a cool relationship temperature-wise. No passion, just practical. Utterly so. It made sense to be together. But as I'd come to realize, love does not rely on logic to make sense.

No surprise then that we had originally decided to get married for practical reasons. Johan being a PhD in Mathematics by this time could potentially work anywhere in the world and not all countries recognized the 'common-law' relationship. I wanted to be able to work wherever we went, so it made sense to marry since we were together and only conceived of being together in the future. To my surprise, Johan got excited about having a real wedding celebrated in the style of a Swedish "sittning." I went along with his idea even though I felt uneasy because I told myself that it wasn't such a big deal to plan a wedding.

I planned most of the wedding in a state of denial, treating it like a job that needed to just get done. I didn't notice until it was nearly too late that it was my own future I was planning without my full awareness. In the last month, leading up to the wedding that wasn't meant-to-be, when I started to not be able to cope with my imprisoned feelings as I had before, I ruminated over the concept of marriage to the point of exhaustion. I wrote in my journal, talked to friends, talked to the mother of a friend, read books – trying to research my way to a solution. I eventually came to realize that my answer was in me. Even though I didn't really want that to be the case.

I realized that I actually wanted marriage to mean something more than just about making my life easier. I wanted marriage to be an expression of love, creativity and awareness. The harder I wanted that from my relationship with Johan though, the more absent it felt. In the end, no matter how much I'd twisted and turned what I knew inside, I couldn't make myself feel the way I knew that I wanted to feel about someone I wanted to marry. It was pure agony until I realized that being with Johan wasn't going to give me what I wanted.

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In Sweden, the "sittning" guests are seated next to people they don't know, alternating girls with boys. A song sheet and schnapps glass is placed at every table setting. At the unwedding, the song sheet was in Swedish, but alongside it was a phonetic version with English sounds so that everyone could join in. Anyone could summon the attention of the room as though to make a speech, but rather than speak, they would refer to the song we were all about to sing and the entire room would break into a melody. It was nothing short of a real life musical. At the end of the song, glasses would raise and shots of "akvavit" thrown back – or sipped, especially if you were a Canadian and unsure about all the Swedish customs taking place in the room.

There was a piano and, Henrik, one of Johan's childhood best friends (thank god!) loved to play it. He effortlessly wore the unofficial title, Master of Ceremonies. Strangely, nothing felt strange that night. It all flowed. It actually felt fun, if not also intriguing.

Somehow it all unfolded the way an orchestra travels through music. It all happened under an orange sky on October 7, 2007.

A planned unwedding wasn't a disaster after all.

We all belly laughed. There was only now and we were all living in it.

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"So, why aren't we getting married ..." I repeated to myself sitting across from Lars in the sushi restaurant. "We'd hurt each other if we did get married. This is the kind thing to do. Isn't it? I mean, I don't want to change Johan so that he can give me what I want and I don't want to be different than I am. I can't be different than I am. We just aren't what the other person needs even though we would like to be."

Lars nodded. He waited.

After some silence I finally said plainly: "I want something different *for* myself, not something different *from* Johan."

I let go. That was it. My truth. And now I was ready for anything he had to say. Okay with anything he had to say.

Lars finally said, "That is a good reason not to get married," and smiled.